

Chairman's Statement
Sen. Tom Coburn, M.D. (R-OK)
Federal Funding of Museums
April 5, 2006

There is great value for communities and citizens in the arts, historic collections and museums. They are a reflection of our culture and people, and are important to our history and national identity. Children and young learners benefit tremendously from art programs in the schools. Believe it or not, I certainly did. These activities make for well rounded citizens, tomorrow's leaders. Museums play an important role in our lives.

The focus of today's hearing is to examine the various avenues of federal funding for museums including authorized programs, grantmaking agencies and earmarks. The Administration has requested at least \$1.45 billion in FY 2007 funds for the arts, cultural or learning activities, and the buildings themselves. If history is a guide, Congress will likely exceed the amount of the request.

The federal government has spent \$7 billion of taxpayer money on museums, centers, institutes, galleries, zoos, aquariums, and halls of fame since 2001. By my estimates, this type of funding has increased almost 25% in the past five years. Though the President actually cut the entire budget for Arts in Education for his FY07 budget request, he proposed a \$65 million *increase* in other such spending overall.

According to 2003 data from the American Association of Museums, the 15,000+ museums in the country depend on government grants for one-fourth of their operating income.

Grantmaking agencies include: NEH, NEA, Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the National Science Foundation's Informal Science Education Program. These grants are competitive. There is a process where an institution must prove its worth and is, from what I understand, closely monitored by the agencies. There are real consequences throughout the grant period if a museum doesn't adhere to the terms and conditions of the award. I wish there was more of that in federal government.

Earmarks, however, get to cut in line and skip the competitive application. Favored projects receive money without having to compete with the other museums. Some authorized funding exists solely for Member earmarking. The Department of Housing and Urban Development makes Economic Development Initiative grants available to Congress for home district projects. There is no competition.

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A review of museum earmarks between fiscal year 2001 and 2006 appropriations bills conference reports uncovered more than 860 earmarks totaling \$567 million. On average, the Appropriators directed 64% of the projects and money to their home states each year.

This type of spending peaked in FY2005 at \$88 million for 183 earmarks. For FY2006 total earmark spending approached \$72 million for 111 earmarks. The decline was likely due to the ban on earmarks in the Labor HHS Education Appropriations bill.

The earmark review also revealed that several museums “double dip,” splitting their earmark requests across bills in the same year to make the amounts more palatable for appropriators, or to hide second requests from one set of appropriators completely. This is like asking Mom for your allowance after Dad already gave it to you.

Even more revealing was the individual entitlements for a handful of museums who receive earmarks for same amounts to fund the same so-called “new” projects year after year. Between FY04 and FY06 one museum requested over \$1.7 million. They had two earmarks each year – one for “construction of a new museum” and the other for “exhibits and programming.” I guess they didn’t plan too well, because in 2006 they also requested money for an “expansion.” There is no review and no accountability. I will be releasing this report on my website this week for anyone who wants to dig further.

I also learned that several museums request money to build “visitors centers” or “learning centers” for the museum. This begs the question: isn’t the museum itself already a center for visitors which facilitates and fosters primary source learning? Isn’t that what a museum is?

Given the local nature of most of the grants and earmarks, it is difficult to defend the expenditure of taxpayer dollars to benefit a small group of people in Muskogee, St. Louis, or Anchorage. If a community truly wanted such an institution or program, they would and should find a way to pay for it with local and state money, or through admission fees.

I am so pleased to learn of the many accountability principles that guide the grant work of Informal Science Education and the Institute of Museum and Library Services which we’ll hear more about today. You’re doing a good job, and you should be recognized.

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I am not challenging the merit of a particular grant or institution today, but would like to remind my colleagues that the current fiscal environment of war, Katrina and Social Security and Medicare insolvency is a very serious situation. One criticism of the President I have is that he has not asked the American people to sacrifice during war time. We cannot, as a government, do everything we would like to do. I think the American people would be very forgiving and willing to make sacrifices if only asked.

During a time of war Presidents Roosevelt and Truman slashed non-defense spending by over 20%. It can be done. I am not advocating a complete termination of these programs or this type of spending. However, it is our responsibility to taxpayers to be frugal, and it is our duty to be transparent and accountable for every dollar of their hard earned money we spend.

Why not hold museum and arts funding steady at current levels? I believe that budget *increases* for nonessential activities during a time of great challenge to our nation are indefensible. It is *Congress* who holds the purse strings and, frankly, we have been unwilling to make the tough decisions today for the future wellbeing of our grandchildren. We've got to stop focusing on political expediency and start thinking about future generations.